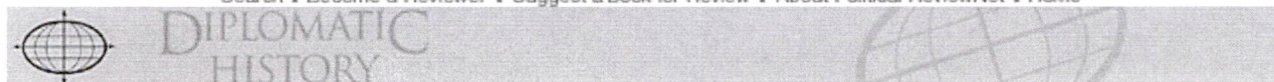




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**Review of:** The Gaither Committee, Eisenhower, and the Cold War by David L. Snead  
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### Feature Review: Reassessing the Gaither Report's Role

If one were making a list of the dozen or so most important Cold War documents, certainly the Gaither Report would be a prime candidate for inclusion. Written by a panel of predominantly civilian outside experts and consultants, it was submitted to President Dwight D. Eisenhower in November 1957, recommending a \$44 billion program for shoring up US strategic offensive and defensive military capabilities. That the report appeared shortly after the Soviet launching of Sputnik made it all the more timely, its recommendations all the more compelling. But whether the Gaither Report was a key turning point in U.S. Cold War policy remains a matter of conjecture. David L. Snead thinks it was, and in this carefully researched and eminently readable monograph, he finds that the Gaither Report "significantly influenced Eisenhower's national security policies for the remainder of his presidency" (p. 3) and helped shape the tone and content of U.S. strategic policy for years to come.

Snead sets his account of the Gaither Report in a broad context. Believing that defense policy needed to be fiscally sound and geared to the long haul, Eisenhower launched his presidency in 1953 with an in-depth strategic review leading to adoption of the "New Look." The linchpin to the New Look's credibility was the U.S. preponderance in nuclear weapons and long-range delivery planes. Thus armed and threatening massive retaliation, the Eisenhower administration expected to deter any large-scale Soviet aggression while holding down defense spending. But as the decade wore on, Soviet advances in nuclear weaponry and in aircraft and missile technology negated much of the U.S. strategic advantage. Even the continental United States appeared in danger of a surprise attack.

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(Korea?)  
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From 1956 on, the Eisenhower administration found itself having to deter not only the Russians but also Democrats in Congress who sought to make political capital out of perceived weaknesses in the country's defense posture. The immediate issue that led to the Gaither Report was an emerging controversy over the need for improved early warning systems and civil defense measures. Goaded by a 1956 congressional investigation, the Federal Civil Defense Agency (FCDA) recommended a five-year \$32 billion shelter program to protect against an expected Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) threat. Before



making a commitment to such an expensive enterprise, Eisenhower wanted a second opinion and called on H. Rowan Gaither, Jr., a West Coast attorney who also sat on the boards of the Ford Foundation and the RAND Corporation, to chair an independent inquiry into the "various active and passive measures to protect the civil population in case of nuclear attack and its aftermath.

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Snead's meticulous account of how the Gaither panel went about its business is undoubtedly the strongest part of the book and its major contribution to the growing literature on this period. Historians as a rule have not paid much attention to the role and influence of outside consultants, so in a sense Snead is breaking new ground. Yet as he readily acknowledges, large gaps in the documentary record make it difficult to reconstruct the committee's activities. A recurring question is how much information the panel had. Intelligence on the Soviet Union was highly speculative and suspect, and there was a tendency on the part of the military services to turn it to self-serving purposes. The most reliable data came from U-2 spy plane photographs, which eventually showed that Soviet missile deployments were considerably fewer than assumed. But while a few panel members may have had access through other means, the U-2 pictures were apparently off limits to the committee as a whole. In other words, the panel operated somewhat in the dark, basing its findings on what later proved to be flawed information.

in 1957,  
true?  
yes  
Still, as Snead presents it, the absence of the U-2 data probably made little difference in the panel's findings that the Soviet Union would have a "significant" ICBM capability by 1959 and that the United States urgently needed offsetting offensive and defensive measures, though probably not the large-scale civil defense shelter program that the FCDA had recommended. The U-2 program, the author correctly points out, was in its infancy and had yet to deliver a comprehensive overview of Soviet deployments. Consequently, even if the Gaither panel had access to U-2 data, it would still have had to base its findings largely on other sources. — why not?

✓  
Although Snead acknowledges that Gaither and his colleagues wound up overestimating Soviet capabilities, he seems to feel that it was the intelligence that was at fault, not the committee's reading of the data. This I find to be a questionable judgment. The actual forecast made by the intelligence community was for a Soviet deployment of ten prototype ICBMs between mid-1958 and mid-1959, and an operational capability in 1960-61. But these estimates were by no means universally accepted. During a joint American-Canadian intelligence review in January 1958, for example, Canadian analysts, relying on essentially the same information the Gaither committee saw, expressed doubt whether Soviet ICBMs would pose a threat to the United States before 1960. (in 1963-?) That the Canadians also declined to commit themselves numerically further underscored their skepticism of U.S. claims. Snead does not mention this episode, but it would have been worth considering.

Exactly why the Gaither panel opted for the high-end estimate is never fully clear from Snead's account, though there are hints that it stemmed from something other than the data. The panel's final report was largely the product of two individuals: the almost legendary Colonel George A. Lincoln, a member of the West Point faculty, who had coordinated much of the army's strategic planning in World War II, and Paul H. Nitze, former director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff during the Truman administration and a central figure in the drafting of NSC-68, which helped to chart the Korean War military buildup. Nitze was a sharp and constant critic of Eisenhower's defense policies and had quarreled repeatedly with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Given the



animosity that had developed between Nitze and Dulles, it was almost a foregone conclusion that Nitze would have few kind words for the administration's policies and programs. All the same, Snead rightly downplays Nitze's role and influence. What he sees instead is an across-the-board disenchantment among panel members with the massive retaliation doctrine and with Eisenhower's outwardly blasé attitude toward recent Soviet accomplishments. The Gaither Report, Snead maintains, was meant as much as anything to jolt Eisenhower into action.

RAND

Where members of the Gaither committee found Eisenhower's attitude puzzling, Snead offers a cogent explanation. Snead is not an Eisenhower enthusiast, but he is sympathetic to the president's worries about excessive military spending and goes to considerable lengths to explain Eisenhower's philosophy of limited government. A fiscal conservative, Eisenhower saw almost as much danger in a bloated military-industrial complex and federal deficit spending as in the Russians. Although the Gaither committee's recommendations may have had utility in the short run, they seemed to Eisenhower to point in the ominous direction of an ever-growing claim on resources by the military. Such concerns may appear surprising, given Eisenhower's army background, but they make sense in light of his disenchantment with the services over their petty rivalries and the debilitating effects he believed this had on the military's readiness, credibility, and public image.

Snead does not explicitly say that the Gaither Report rather than Sputnik set in motion the strategic buildup of the late 1950s and 1960s, but he comes pretty close. In assessing the report's impact, he draws heavily on recently declassified NSC materials from the Eisenhower Library and makes a plausible case that the report was instrumental in pacifying both the post-Sputnik missile buildup and the increased attention accorded to improvements in early warning systems and to active air and missile defenses. While Sputnik may have generated strong public and congressional support for action, it was the Gaither Report, Snead argues, that "provided specific recommendations to overcome any possible deficiencies in U.S. military preparedness" (p. 4). Maybe so, though other evidence indicates that, with or without the Gaither Report, the results would have been essentially the same. As Robert J. Watson demonstrates in his recent history of the Office of the Secretary of Defense for this period (a book not available before Snead's came out), the accelerated ballistic missile programs and other improvements that Eisenhower approved immediately following Sputnik originated not with the Gaither panel but with the military services, which had failed in the past to obtain the necessary funding. With the emotional boost of Sputnik and the added endorsement of the Gaither panel, their arguments simply carried more weight.

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Snead also looks at the longer term consequences of the Gaither Report and concludes that, while there is no direct evidence to tie it and John F. Kennedy's defense policies together, "the similarities between the committee's recommendations and the new administration's flexible response strategy are readily apparent" (p. 159). By this, Snead does not mean that flexible response grew out of the Gaither Report, but rather that it helped to generate viable alternatives to massive retaliation. Many of the same people who served on the Gaither panel became senior officials in the Kennedy administration and carried their ideas with them. More importantly, the Gaither Report, though still top secret, became almost required reading for the new administration's upper echelon. Kennedy requested a copy immediately after becoming president, and I understand that Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara did the same. Even so, Kennedy and McNamara were cautious proponents of the study's recommendations. Having alleged during the 1960 presidential campaign that

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there was a "missile gap" between the United States and the Soviet Union, Kennedy found himself embarrassed when McNamara declared the whole thing a myth shortly after the new administration took office. The Soviets, it turned out, had far fewer ICBMs than anyone expected. Although McNamara also spent a lot of time examining a stepped-up civil defense program, he eventually concluded that it fell short of meeting the "cost effectiveness" criteria he so rigorously applied. Likewise, he was slow to embrace the need for an antiballistic missile system (ABM), not because he doubted that it would offer some measure of protection, but because, like Eisenhower, he questioned it on technical grounds.

In assessing the Gaither Report's broader impact, there is one area where Snead is strangely silent – arms control. Some years ago while I was helping Paul Nitze organize his memoirs, we talked about what he saw as the importance behind the Gaither Report. He felt that out of that experience two points of view had emerged. One held that nuclear deterrence was still a valid concept worth preserving and refining; the other, that the continued existence of nuclear weapons only invited a nuclear war and that the United States and the Soviet Union needed to find something other than technology to guarantee their security. The latter group, Nitze felt, became a driving force behind the arms control movement that gathered momentum in the 1960s and 1970s. The Gaither Report may not have been solely responsible, but it encouraged those in the mainstream of the national security establishment to give arms control a closer, more serious look and to treat it as something other than a propaganda ploy, as it had become in the 1950s.

All things considered, however, this is still a fine book, as near to a definitive account of the Gaither Report's origins and activities as we are likely to see. One might quibble with the author's interpretation of the report's impact, but it is hard to dispute his basic premise that it helped set the stage for the strategic buildup of the 1960s. Tying together strategic thinking, bureaucratic politics, and the role of outside consultants, it is also a major contribution to our understanding of how the policymaking process works.

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